

# The press versus the president, part two

[By Jeff Gerth](#)

January 30, 2023

## Chapter 2: The origins of fake news

In a windowless conference room at Trump Tower, on January 6, 2017, Comey briefed the president-elect about the dossier about him and Russia. Trump had heard, from aides, media “rumblings” about Russia, but, in an interview, he said he was unaware of the dossier until he met with Comey.

Comey’s one-on-one with Trump came after the intelligence community briefed him on a new “Intelligence Community Assessment” (ICA) on Russian activities in 2016. The ICA claimed that Russia had mounted an “influence campaign” aimed at the election but had not targeted or compromised vote-tallying systems. Its most important, and controversial, finding was that “Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump,” as opposed to Russia’s usual goal, which was generally sowing chaos in the United States. An unclassified version of the ICA was released the same day in Washington. The dossier, actually a series of reports in 2016, was included in the assessment, but it remained secret, temporarily, because a summary of it was attached as a classified appendix.

“The only thing that really resonated,” Trump said about the briefing, “was when he said four hookers,” a reference to the unsubstantiated claim of a salacious encounter in Moscow. Trump’s immediate reaction was that “this is not going to be good for the family,” he recalled. But his wife, Melania, “did not believe it at all,” telling him, “That’s not your deal with the golden shower,” Trump recalled.

Trump’s marriage might have survived but his hoped for honeymoon with the press was about to end. The dossier, largely suppressed by the media in 2016, was about to surface.

But first came the ICA. It received massive, and largely uncritical coverage.

Some other reporters weren’t convinced. Gessen called the ICA “flawed” because it was based on “conjecture” and incorporated “misreported or mistranslated” and “false” public statements. They criticized the major media, including the *New York Times*, for describing the ICA as a “strong statement.”

In an interview, Gessen said that their skepticism left them isolated and they began to “lose confidence.”

The dossier wound up in the ICA because the FBI pushed it, despite reservations at the CIA. Agency analysts saw it as an “internet rumor,” according to Justice Department documents. Two “senior managers in the CIA mission center responsible for Russia” also had reservations, according to a memoir by Brennan, the head of the agency at the time. Brennan testified that it didn’t inform the report’s analysis or judgments, though Adm. Mike Rogers, the head of the NSA, told the House Intelligence Committee it was “part of the overall ICA review/approval process.” Whatever its significance, the fact that top government officials were using the dossier in an official report and a presidential briefing was the news hook the media needed.

On Sunday, January 8, McCabe, the FBI’s deputy director, sent a memo to the bureau’s leadership headlined “the flood is coming.” He noted that CNN was “close to” publishing a piece about the dossier, with the “trigger” being Comey’s brief and the dossier’s attachment to the ICA.

The dam broke two days later when CNN disclosed the Comey briefing. Hours later, *BuzzFeed News* posted the full dossier, with a warning that the material was “unverified and potentially unverifiable.” Both outlets cited the government use of the dossier to justify their going ahead.

It was a twist to the symbiotic relationship between the media and the national-security apparatus; usually, reporters use pending government action as a peg for their stories. In this case the government cited the media for its actions. Comey, in his 2018 book *A Higher Loyalty*, wrote that CNN had “informed the FBI press office they were going to run with it as soon as the next day,” so “I could see no way out of” telling Trump. Comey also cited CNN’s imminent disclosure in a subsequent explanation to Trump, according to Comey’s notes.

Ben Smith, then the editor of *BuzzFeed News*, said in an interview the decision was a “journalistic no-brainer,” especially since *BuzzFeed* was a “slightly fringy place.” A *BuzzFeed* reporter, Ken Bensinger, got access to the dossier via David Kramer, a close associate of then-senator John McCain. He photographed the pages when Kramer was out of the room, according to Kramer’s testimony in a libel suit. Kramer also testified he would not have granted “access” to Bensinger if he knew “*BuzzFeed* would publish.” (Kramer declined to comment after I sent him an email explaining what this article would say about him.)

Bensinger had been vetting the dossier, but was on vacation at Disney World with his family when CNN aired its story. A *BuzzFeed* editor called him to say the publication planned to publish the entire document, a possibility that had not previously been discussed, Bensinger said in an interview. A few minutes later, in a call with Smith and other editors, Bensinger voiced his opposition to publishing the raw material but was told the decision had already been made. Smith declined to discuss Bensinger’s role, suggesting I ask him directly. (Bensinger joined the *New York Times* in August; Smith left last January, after two years as a media columnist, to co-found a new global media outlet, *Semafor*.)

Though many in the media later criticized Smith's decision—some even called it “fake news”—Smith held his ground in our conversation. He said some publications had “problematic” and “secret” relationships with the dossier's sponsor or author that prevented them from revealing the information. (CJR defended *BuzzFeed's* decision at the time, but in 2021, with the dossier's credibility crumbling, Kyle Pope, CJR's editor, said that was a mistake.)

Wolf Blitzer, a CNN host, said shortly after the story broke that “CNN would not have done a story about the dossier's existence” if officials “hadn't told Trump about it.” CNN, in its story, also said the sources used by the author of the report, described as a former British intelligence agent, soon to be outed as Steele, had been “checked out” over the past few months and found to be “credible enough.”

It turns out that a few weeks after the FBI began checking out the dossier, in the fall of 2016, it offered Steele as much as \$1 million if he could offer corroboration and he didn't, according to court testimony by an FBI official in October.

Steele, in response to my questions earlier this year, wrote that his “raw intelligence reports” were meant only “for client oral briefing, rather than a finished and assessed written intelligence product,” which would have contained “sourcing caveats.” Thus, Steele wrote, “the quality of the Dossier reports was fine imo.” He said only one minor detail had been “disproved,” with the rest either corroborated or unverified.

In response to follow-up questions, he provided additional corroborative information, but it was mostly off the record. In a lengthy 2017 interview with the FBI, Steele attributed a large majority of the dossier to his “primary sub-source,” according to the FBI report. But, in response to my questions, he declined to discuss the work of his main source, Igor Danchenko, a Russian living in the US. CNN's story claimed “his [Steele's] investigations related to Mr. Trump were initially funded by groups and donors supporting Republican opponents of Mr. Trump during the GOP primaries.” But the sponsors of the dossier, writing in a book in 2019, made clear the dossier came later, as a separate project, and the research trove commissioned by anti-Trump Republicans was never shared with Steele. Steele confirmed that in his response to my questions. (Other news outlets made the same mistake—and CNN repeated it in August 2018—though when the Associated Press got it wrong in February 2018 the news agency ran a correction the next day. CNN, in a deep dive into the dossier in November 2021, correctly described the dossier sponsors. The 2017 CNN story later won the Merriman Smith Award from the White House Correspondents' Association; the citation noted how the network story made the dossier “part of the lexicon.”)

But it would be the fallout from the dossier, even more than the document itself, that would be the most enduring legacy for Trump. At a news conference the next day, Trump said “I think it was Russia” that was behind the hacking and Putin “should not be doing it. He won't be doing it. Russia will have greater respect for our country.” After Trump trashed CNN for its report, the network's correspondent Jim Acosta interrupted Mara Liasson of NPR to ask a question as part of a response to Trump's comments. Trump declined, saying “you are fake news,” the first time he had publicly labeled an individual journalist using those words. Trump would go on to make

the words a hallmark of his presidency—about once a day in his first year alone—and the phrase became *Collier's Dictionary's* Word of the Year for 2017.

Jonathan Karl, the ABC White House correspondent, in his 2020 book *Front Row at the Trump Show*, wrote that “Acosta was, in fact, rudely interrupting Mara Liasson,” and most reporters saw it that way. More broadly, Karl said the media coverage of Trump was “relentlessly and exhaustively negative,” rather than “striving for fairness and objectivity,” and did “as much to undermine the credibility of the free press as the president’s taunts.” A year later, Karl wrote another Trump book, *Betrayal*, that called out the former president’s “lying” and “incompetence,” culminating in “the betrayal of democracy at the end.” He acknowledged his criticism could make him “sound like a member of the opposition party,” but the ABC correspondent was okay with that: “so be it,” he added.

It didn’t take long for Steele’s name to become public as the author of the dossier. Bradley Hope, then at the *Wall Street Journal*, said in an interview that he discovered Steele’s name after talking to two people in the private intelligence world. They quickly told him the *BuzzFeed*-published reports contained clues indicating they were Steele’s, including the “exact style” and “the shoddiness of it.” Other sources, he said, “verified” Steele’s role.

Steele, in his response to me, accused one of the *Journal* coauthors, Alan Cullison, of a “breach of confidence” with Kramer, the McCain confidant who provided the dossier to *BuzzFeed*. Steele went on to also attack Hope for what “looks like a post-hoc cover story,” adding, in a subsequent reply, that his explanation “seems implausible” based on the formatting his company uses. Finally, Steele linked the story to a “politically partisan line taken against me” and others “by the WSJ to benefit Trump and the Republicans.”

Hope, in an email, called Steele’s claim “100% false,” adding that Steele’s “conspiracy speculation” leads Hope “to doubt the whole analytical framework” Steele “uses to view the world.” Cullison, in an email, said “Kramer did not tell me” Steele’s identity and “the story of Steele’s identity was born of Bradley’s work.” Kramer declined to comment after I disclosed all sides of the dispute to him.

The *Times* quickly weighed in after the *Journal* disclosure, first with an explainer that said it would not name the “research firm and the former British spy because of a confidential source agreement with *The New York Times*.” Yet hours later, the paper did just that, publishing another story that identified Fusion as the firm that hired Steele. (The online version of the explainer was later altered to identify the parties but the newspaper never disclosed the change to readers.)

The WSJ and the *Times* stories were not well received by Fusion. At first, they feared for Steele’s safety. Then they felt the *Times*’ behavior was “improper,” because it had “unilaterally” published material “it had learned off the record,” the founders wrote in their book.

Hours after the *Times* story ran, the *Post* upped the temperature on Russia even more. Columnist David Ignatius disclosed that incoming national security adviser Michael Flynn had phoned Russia’s US ambassador “several times” at the end of the year, according to “a senior

US government official.” Ignatius noted the talks had come on the day the Obama administration had expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for the country’s hacking activities, so he questioned whether Flynn had “violated” the spirit of an “unenforced” law barring US citizens from trying to resolve “disputes.”

Ignatius went on to write that it might be a “good thing” if Trump’s team was trying to de-escalate the situation. But Ignatius didn’t know the substance of the conversations. Hours before his story went online, Ignatius appeared on MSNBC and, while not disclosing his upcoming Flynn exclusive, said “it was hard to argue” against the need to “improve relations with Russia.”

The existence of Flynn’s talks with the ambassador was known by Adam Entous, a reporter then at the *Post*, but he held off writing anything because the mere fact of a contact wasn’t enough to justify a story. “It could have been something innocent,” Entous, now with the *Times*, said in an interview, “something he would be praised for.”

On the heels of the Ignatius column, the FBI’s “investigative tempo increased,” according to FBI records, and the Senate intelligence panel announced an inquiry into Russia’s election activities. (The House Intelligence Committee announced a similar effort later that month.)

Two days after the Senate announcement, Bob Woodward, appearing on Fox News, called the dossier a “garbage document” that “never should have” been part of an intelligence briefing. He later told me that the *Post* wasn’t interested in his harsh criticism of the dossier. After his remarks on Fox, Woodward said he “reached out to people who covered this” at the paper, identifying them only generically as “reporters,” to explain why he was so critical. Asked how they reacted, Woodward said: “To be honest, there was a lack of curiosity on the part of the people at the *Post* about what I had said, why I said this, and I accepted that and I didn’t force it on anyone.”

Trump at the time tweeted a “thank you” to Woodward and asked the media to “apologize.” That, of course, never happened. Trump’s relationship with the media, by then, had reached “the point of no return,” according to a former aide.

As Trump prepared to take office, the possibility of another Watergate was on the mind of some reporters, several journalists told me, intensifying the competition. “There was a feeding frenzy to try and be first with the story,” Entous explained to me.

The day before Trump’s inauguration, the *Times* featured a story: “Intercepted Russian Communications Part of Inquiry into Trump Associates.” The piece, once posted, evoked a strong reaction from Strzok, who was leading the FBI inquiry: “no substance and largely wrong,” he texted, adding “the press is going to undermine its credibility.”

Hours later, Liz Spayd, the *Times*’ public editor, posted a column criticizing the October 31 piece, which reported that the FBI had found no clear link between Trump and Russia. Spayd wrote that the story “downplayed its significance” and disclosed that the FBI had asked the paper to delay publication. Spayd also contrasted the paper’s “relentless” coverage of the

Clinton email matter with its “timid” pursuit of the Russia investigation in 2016. Baquet defended his handling of the story to Spayd.

After the column came out, Baquet quickly emailed several colleagues, saying Spayd’s piece was “really bad,” mainly for its disclosure of confidential information regarding deliberations about whether to publish the Alfa Bank matter. One year later, Baquet told the *Post*’s Wemple that “we would have cast that [October] story differently but it was never meant to give the Trump campaign a clean bill of health.”

Spayd, in an email to me, complained that the *Times* had “two standards.” Before the election, she wrote, the October 31 piece was “downplayed” because the paper “didn’t know whether the allegations held up,” but after the election, “the *Times* produced a steady stream of stories about whether Trump conspired with Russians to win the election without knowing whether the allegation was actually true.”

Trump told me he noticed the difference in coverage once he took office. Not only did he have to run the country, he had to fight off “unbelievably fake” stories. Spayd, a former editor of CJR, left the *Times* a few months after the column was published, and the position of public editor was ultimately abolished.

Even as those debates were unfolding in the *Times* newsroom, the paper was about to land what it thought was its bombshell. The paper was so sure of itself that it let a filmmaker capture internal deliberations, which wound up airing in a 2018 series on Showtime called *The Fourth Estate*.

As the story is being edited, Mark Mazzetti, an investigative reporter in the Washington bureau who was also helping edit some of the Trump-Russia coverage, is shown telling senior editors he is “fairly sure members of Russian intelligence” were “having conversations with members of Trump’s campaign.” (The story would say the conversations were based on “phone records and intercepted calls” and involved “senior Russian intelligence officials.” ) He asks Baquet, “Are we feeding into a conspiracy” with the “recurring themes of contacts?”

Baquet responded that he wanted the story, up high, to “show the range” and level of “contacts” and “meetings, some of which may be completely innocent” and not “sinister,” followed by a “nut” or summary “graph,” explaining why “this is something that continues to hobble them.”

Baquet’s desire to flush out the details of supposed contacts is similar to his well-founded skepticism in October 2016 about the supposed computer links between a Russian bank and the Trump organization.

Mazzetti reports back that the story is “nailed down.”

Baquet asks, “Can you pull it off?”

“Oh yeah,” Mazzetti replies.

So Baquet signs off, adding that it's the "biggest story in years."

Elisabeth Bumiller, the Washington bureau chief, adds her seal of approval: "There'll be hair on fire."

As for the specific details Baquet asked to be included in the story, the reporters simply wrote that their sources "would not disclose many details." The piece did contain a disclaimer up high, noting that their sources, "so far," had seen "no evidence" of the Trump campaign colluding with the Russians.

But in the next paragraph it reported anonymous officials being "alarmed" about the supposed Russian-Trump contacts because they occurred while Trump made his comments in Florida in July 2016 wondering whether Russia could find Hillary's missing emails.

The story said "the FBI declined to comment." In fact, the FBI was quickly ripping the piece to shreds, in a series of annotated comments by Strzok, who managed the Russia case. His analysis, prepared for his bosses, found numerous inaccuracies, including a categorical refutation of the lead and headline; "we are unaware," Strzok wrote, "of ANY Trump advisers engaging in conversations with Russian intelligence officials." Comey immediately checked with other intelligence agencies to see if they had any such evidence, came up empty, and relayed his findings to a closed Senate briefing, according to testimony at a Senate hearing months later.

In the article's discussion of the dossier, it described Steele as having "a credible track record" and noted the FBI had recently contacted "some" of Steele's "sources." Actually, the FBI had recently interviewed Steele's "primary" source, a Russian working at a Washington think tank, who told them Steele's reporting was "misstated or exaggerated" and the Russian's own information was based on "rumor and speculation," according to notes of the interview released later. The day the *Times* piece appeared in print, Strzok emailed colleagues and reported that Steele "may not be in a position to judge the reliability" of his network of sources, according to Justice Department documents released in 2020.

CNN quickly followed the *Times* story with a more modest account, noting Trump advisers had been in "constant communication during the campaign with Russians known to US intelligence." The White House, a few days later, told reporters that the two top FBI officials, Comey and McCabe, had privately told the White House that the *Times* story was inaccurate, with McCabe calling it "bullshit." This was consistent with Strzok's analysis, but the FBI, following custom, stayed silent, according to the pool report for White House correspondents and a former government official. The White House had told the FBI it was getting "crushed" on the *Times* story, according to the pool report, which most media outlets ignored.

Strzok, in an interview, said his analysis was done for senior FBI leadership, including "Comey, Andy, and Bill" Priestap, his supervisor, "to say there were problems there." I emailed Comey's lawyer and a close associate seeking an interview. Comey never responded.

Trump allies put out a similar message about the *Times* piece. Devin Nunes, then the Republican chairman of the House intelligence panel, repeatedly reached out to reporters to try and knock it down, noting his investigation, which included access to FBI and other intelligence material, had seen no such evidence as cited by the *Times*. But reporters were skeptical. One asked Nunes if he was working with the White House in “some sort of coordinated effort to push back,” according to a transcript.

Nunes, at one briefing in the wake of the *Times* piece, seemed to toss in the towel: “I can’t control what you guys write,” the transcript shows. It wasn’t until June, after there was a public rebuke of the story by Comey, that news outlets saw fit to question its reliability.

The *Times* piece “was the peak of the frenzy” over Trump and Russia, Cullison, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who covered the issue, told me. “It’s kind of like the Watergate burglary,” Woodward said, because it helped “launch the issue.” The day after the story appeared in print, Trump held a press briefing where he called the *Times* story “a joke” and “fake news.”

He was asked whether his use of “fake news” wasn’t “undermining confidence in our news media.”

“No, no,” he replied, he just wanted a more “honest” press. “The public doesn’t believe you people anymore,” and “now, maybe I had something to do with that.”

After his contentious, seventy-seven-minute press briefing in the wake of the *Times* story in February 2017, Trump left for Florida, believing that the *Times* story was “the final nail in the coffin,” according to an aide who went with him.

Soon after his plane landed, he turned to Twitter and called the “FAKE NEWS media” the “enemy of the American people,” citing several news organizations, including the *Times* and CNN.

The phrase was coined more than a decade ago by Pat Caddell, a Democratic pollster going back to the 1970s. Caddell, who died in 2019, became disillusioned with the party, and became an analyst on Fox News. He explained to *The New Yorker* in 2017 why he wound up in Trump’s orbit:

“People said he was just a clown,” he told the writer Jane Mayer, “but I’ve learned that you should always pay attention to successful ‘clowns.’” Mayer reported that Trump met with Caddell in South Carolina, on his way to Florida, and hours before the “enemies” tweet. It was a few days before the 2016 election when Caddell, appearing on a now defunct conservative podcast, *Media Madness*, said the media was on a “political jihad against Trump” and “they’re making themselves the enemies of the American people.”

It went unnoticed. But once Trump adopted, and turbocharged, Caddell’s slogan, the war between the president and the media had been officially declared and chances of a truce were slim.

Marty Baron, the executive editor of the *Post* at the time, thought then that going forward, Trump “would vilify” the press, “actually dehumanize us,” he told the newspaper in 2021 upon his retirement. Just after the 2017 tweet, Baron offered a strong response from the press, even though Trump had not included the *Post* in his list of enemies: speaking at a conference, he said, “We’re not at war with the administration, we’re at work.”

The *Times* had its own take on the tweet’s “escalating rhetoric” and Trump’s relationship with the Washington press corps. A story published one week later, coauthored by the paper’s White House correspondent, explained how Trump “has stumbled into the most conventional of Washington traps: believing he can master an entrenched political press corps with far deeper connections to the permanent government.”

That echoes how NBC’s chief foreign correspondent, Richard Engel, described the leak of the dossier on MSNBC’s *Rachel Maddow Show*, hours after it was posted in January. The “intelligence community,” Engel’s “senior intelligence source” had told him, had decided to “drop” the dossier “like a bomb” on Trump because they were “angry” and wanted to “put him on notice” that they needed answers to the Russia-related questions swirling around him.

For Trump and his allies, Engel’s remarks and the *Times* account describe what they saw as a “Deep State” out to get the president. In the days after Trump’s declaration, the *Times* surveyed its new digital subscribers, millions of whom flocked to the paper during his presidency, to better understand their motivations: the administration’s “vilification of the press,” one subscriber replied, in a typical response, according to “New Digital Subscribers Survey” data provided to me by a *Times* staffer.

Trump would often call the *Times* “failing,” including the day after the controversial story about Russia-Trump ties, but in fact the soaring digital-subscriber base throughout his presidency offset the steady fall in revenue from print subscribers and advertising.

On March 1, 2017, the *Times* stood by the accuracy of its explosive story about Trump’s Russia connections but tried some clarification. Whereas the first story cited four anonymous sources, now the *Times* had found “more than a half dozen officials” said to have “confirmed contacts of various kinds.” Then, however, the story muddled the original question of whether Trump associates had contacted “senior Russian intelligence officials” by noting that “the label ‘intelligence official’ is not always cleanly applied in Russia.”

FBI officials thought the story was a mess. Messages later made public from that day indicated the bureau thought the *Times* would try to “correct” its mistakes from a few weeks earlier and “save their reputation.” But, as Strzok saw it, the paper was “doubling down on the inaccuracies.”

Strzok met with reporters from the paper the next day, according to FBI records. When I asked him about his dealings with them he said that “anytime I talked to the media it was at the direction of and with the participation of members of the FBI’s Office of Public Affairs.”

Baquet's original concerns in mid-February, about distinguishing between "innocent" and "sinister" contacts, were not addressed in the March 1 story. Then, two days later, another *Times* story—"Trump Team's Links to Russia"—addressed the problem, while referencing the disputed February story. The article noted it would have been "absurd and contrary to American interests" to avoid meetings with Russians before or after the campaign and that the repeated Trump-related contacts involved "courtesy calls, policy discussions, and business contacts" and "nothing has emerged publicly indicating anything more sinister." One of the writers interviewed Konstantin Kilimnik, the former Ukrainian business partner of Manafort's, who ran Trump's 2016 campaign for a few months and whose name appeared in the February story about Trump aides overheard talking to senior Russian intelligence officials.

Kilimnik was described in the article as having been under investigation in Ukraine in 2016 "on suspicion of ties to Russian spy agencies," but, the article said, no charges were brought. Kilimnik, born in Russia, told the *Times* that he had never been questioned. If he did have any such ties, "they would arrest me." Kilimnik, in an email to me, said his interaction then with the *Times* arose because two *Times* reporters joined a "background talk" at a "dinner with a friend." As was often the case, the news cycle shifted within hours. Early on a Saturday morning, Trump tweeted that his predecessor, Barack Obama, "had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower" before the election. The claim was quickly denied by spokespersons for Obama and the federal government, and a new line of attack against Trump was opened.

Trump says he based his tweet on something he saw on Fox News that morning. "I was watching Bret Baier Saturday morning," he said in an interview, referring to an episode that ran the night before, "and he had used the words spying on my campaign." Trump thought the tweet "was innocuous" until an aide told him, "Sir, the lines are lit up."

A transcript of Baier's show, *Special Report*, has him talking about a "wiretap at Trump Tower with some computer and Russian banks," adding that "the Obama administration was pretty aggressive with a couple of FISAs."

Most media went big on the wiretapping flap. The next day, James Clapper, the former Director of National Intelligence under Obama, went on *Meet the Press* to say "there was no such wiretap activity." He also said that during his time in office, which ended January 20, "we had no evidence of such collusion," speaking of Trump's campaign and Russia.

The *Post* put the collusion denial at the end of its story, while the *Times* ignored it.

On March 20, Comey appeared before the House Intelligence Committee and gave official blessing to the collusion narrative running rampant in the media. He testified that the FBI was "investigating the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government, and whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia's efforts."

Before Comey's testimony, Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat, read an opening statement in which he quoted from the dossier's unsubstantiated allegation about Carter Page meeting with a

sanctioned Russian official close to Putin in 2016 to discuss an extraordinarily lucrative business deal in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. The California Democrat would go on MSNBC two days later to state that there was “more than circumstantial evidence now” of collusion. He offered no substantiation. Schiff declined to comment through his press aide, Lauren French, who said, in an email, “this isn’t something we’re going to move forward on.”

The *Post* did a major story a week later that seemed to burnish the dossier’s main conspiracy allegation.

It didn’t hold up. Two weeks after that the *Post* followed with the disclosure of the Carter Page FISA surveillance, a story that turned out to have significant omissions.

The *Post* landed a long story about Sergei Millian, a Belarusian-American businessman, on March 29. The top of the piece identified Millian as the source behind the dossier’s most serious allegation, a “well-developed conspiracy” between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin, the same ground covered by the *Wall Street Journal* and ABC in January. The claim that Millian was a key informant whose information was “central to the dossier” was stated without any attribution or sourcing. In 2021 the *Post* retracted the parts of the story describing Millian as a dossier source after John Durham, a special counsel looking into the origins of the Trump-Russia investigations, indicted Steele’s main source for lying to the FBI. Durham alleged the fact of Millian being a source had been “fabricated.” The *Post* editor’s note explained that Durham’s indictment “contradicted” information in the March story, and additional reporting in 2021 further “undermined” the account. The *Post* also deleted parts of a few other stories that repeated the allegation that Millian was a dossier source.

After the retractions, the *Post* editor who replaced Baron, Sally Buzbee, said to the *Times* that the paper had been “very skeptical about the contents of the dossier.” Some *Post* reporters—though not the authors of the piece—had called the contents “garbage” and “bullshit.” Buzbee and other *Post* journalists declined my requests for an interview. A *Post* spokesperson said that the piece was part of an effort “to scrutinize the origins of the dossier” and that the paper had “made it clear how hard it was to verify the dossier.”

In early April, the *Post* story on Page landed, calling the surveillance “the clearest evidence so far that the FBI had reason to believe during the 2016 presidential campaign that a Trump campaign adviser was in touch with Russian agents. Such contacts are now at the center of an investigation into whether the campaign coordinated with the Russian government to swing the election in Trump’s favor.” It noted Page’s “effusive praise” for Putin and mentioned Schiff’s congressional recitation of the Page allegations in the dossier. Relying on anonymous sources, it gave a vague update on the dossier’s credibility: “some of the information in the dossier had been verified by US intelligence agencies, and some of it hasn’t.”

At the *Times*, the newsroom was irked about getting beaten by the *Post*. “*Times* is angry with us about the WP scoop,” Strzok texted to an FBI colleague, a few days later.

But the *Post* scoop was incomplete. Its anonymous sources mirrored the FBI's suspicions but left out the bureau's missteps and exculpatory evidence, as subsequent investigations revealed. It turns out that the secret surveillance of Page was an effort to bring in heavier artillery to an FBI inquiry that, in the fall of 2016, wasn't finding any nefarious links, as the *Times* reported back then. Agents were able to review "emails between Page and members of the Donald J. Trump for President Campaign concerning campaign related matters," according to an inquiry in 2019 by the Justice Department Inspector General. FBI documents show the surveillance of Page targeted four facilities, two email, one cell, and one Skype.

Still, even with the added surveillance capability, the investigation had not turned up evidence for any possible charges by the date of the *Post* piece, which came four days after the secret surveillance, called FISA, for the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, was renewed for the second time. (Page was never charged.)

The IG review also found that the FISA warrant process was deeply flawed. It relied heavily on the dossier, including the fabricated Millian allegation of a conspiracy, the IG found. Furthermore, the report said the warrants contained seventeen "significant errors and omissions," such as leaving out exculpatory information about Page, including his previous work for the CIA and comments he made to an undercover FBI informant. And by the time of the *Post* piece, the dossier's credibility was collapsing; the FBI knew the CIA called it "internet rumor," and on its own the FBI "did not find corroboration for Steele's election reporting," according to the IG report.

The *Post* spokesperson, who would only speak on background, said the article on Page was "fair and accurate" and meant to reflect "how deeply the FBI's suspicions were about Page." They acknowledged the story was incomplete, noting that "at that time there was a lot that was not publicly known."

Trump, by the spring of 2017, was more than uneasy with Comey. In one of his chats, he told the director his policies were "bad" for Russia because he wanted "more oil and more nukes" and the FBI inquiry was creating a "cloud" over his dealings with foreign leaders, according to Comey's notes.

Finally, he had enough. Trump met with senior officials, and his deputy counsel told him that firing Comey would prolong, not curb, the FBI investigation and possibly result in the appointment of a special counsel, according to lawyers briefed on the meeting.

"The president acknowledged" the dire prognosis in the meeting, according to William Barr, who, as attorney general in 2019, oversaw the end of the Mueller inquiry. But the president didn't care, declaring, according to Barr: "I'm still going to fire the son of a bitch."

He did just that.

### ***A note on disclosure***

In 2015–16, I was a senior reporter at *ProPublica*. There, I reported on Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Russian oligarchs, among other subjects. I helped *ProPublica* decide whether to collaborate with a book that was critical of the Clintons' involvement with Russia; the arrangement didn't happen. Another of the projects I worked on, also involving Clinton, was published in the *Washington Post* in 2016, where I shared a byline. Some of my other Clinton-related work was used in 2016 articles appearing in the *New York Times*, my employer between 1976 and 2005, but without my byline. Initially, the *Times* sought my assistance on a story about Hillary's handling of Bill Clinton's infidelity. Subsequently I approached the paper on my own about the Clinton family foundation. In both cases, I interacted with reporters and editors but was not involved in the writing or editing of the stories that used my reporting. During the second interaction, I expressed disappointment to one of the *Times* reporters about the final result.

I left *ProPublica* in December 2016. That month I was approached by one of the cofounders of Fusion GPS, who sounded me out about joining a Trump-related project the firm was contemplating. The discussion did not lead to any collaboration. I had previously interacted with Fusion related to my reporting on Russian oligarchs.

In the 2017–18 academic year I was a nonresident fellow at the Investigative Reporting Program, affiliated with the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. There, one of my projects involved looking into the dossier as part of preliminary research for a 2020 film the Investigative Reporting Program helped produce for HBO on Russian meddling. I was not on the film's credits.

At CJR, these stories have been edited by Kyle Pope, its editor and publisher. Kyle's wife, Kate Kelly, is a reporter for the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*. CJR's former board chair was Steve Adler, formerly the editor in chief of Reuters; its current board chair is Rebecca Blumenstein, a former deputy managing editor of the *Times* who recently became president of editorial for NBC News.